

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR SCIENCE ADVICE HEARING
July 25, 2006

I want to welcome everyone here for today's hearing on the vitally important topic of how Congress should get scientific advice, and I want to thank Mr. Holt for urging us to have this hearing.

We have an excellent panel of witnesses before us today, and I hope they will give us some specific ideas for how we might improve the mechanisms for providing science advice to the Congress. I think we need to get beyond the debate about reviving the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA).

I was a strong defender of OTA – and I voted against defunding it – but OTA is not likely to be coming back any time soon.

I also have to say, as a proponent of OTA, that the reaction to the loss of OTA has been somewhat disproportionate. If you listen to the scientific community, you might think that OTA was the only thing separating Congress from barbarism. We do have plenty of current sources of information, particularly the National Academies, so the question before us today is: what specific gaps exist and how can they be filled?

Also, much of the lament one hears about OTA's demise is really not a concern about what advice Congress is getting, but rather about what decisions Congress is making. So it's important to remember that not all people will reach the same policy conclusion based on the same scientific information – even if they understand and accept that information.

Perhaps the most dangerous fallacy in Washington is: "If you knew what I know, you'd think like I think." Let's not confuse policy differences with ignorance.

Which is not to say that Congress does not sometimes display ignorance, sometimes willful ignorance. But that's not a problem of not receiving advice; it's a problem of not listening to it. To take one current example, the National Academy a few weeks ago released a clear, balanced and thoughtful overview of the current understanding of global temperature over the past 1,000 years. Some Members have taken that report to heart; others are trying to distract from its conclusions by focusing on individual papers that have already been superseded. That's their right, but my only point here is that the debate says nothing about the quality of the information Congress is receiving.

So I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. But in discussing what kinds of information science needs, let's make sure we're not confusing the availability of information with any other issues.

Mr. Gordon.